



Foal Heat Breeding

by HEATHER SMITH THOMAS

Most mares have a short heat period soon after foaling (about 90 percent will show a foal heat) and if bred at this time, will foal about three weeks earlier the next year. This can be helpful on a breeding farm where horsemen are trying to make sure mares have a foal every year. Breeding season is generally considered to be over by July, since few people want foals born late in the year.

Traditionally, veterinarians have advised against breeding mares at foal heat, since many mares are not quite recovered enough from foaling at this time; the breeding either is not successful (the mare fails to conceive) or the pregnancy is lost later, due to infection that was not yet cleared out of the uterus at the time of breeding. With good management, however, a lot of mares can be bred at foal heat.

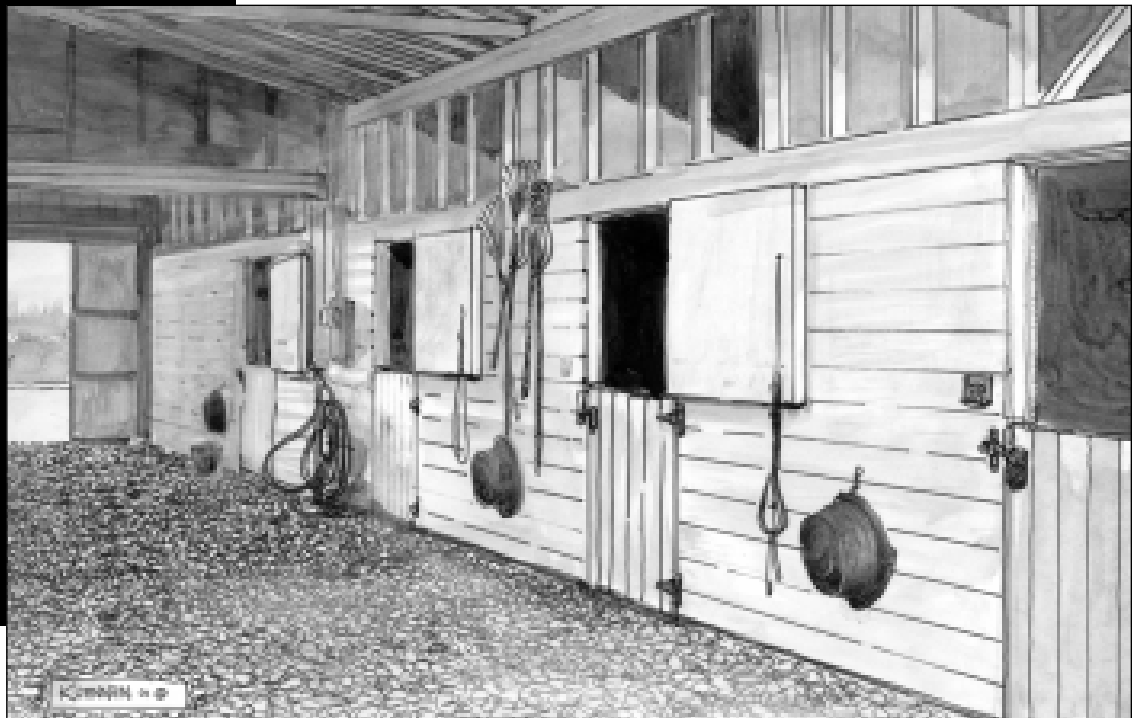
Most mares experience minor infections for a short time after foaling, and mares that have their foal heat soon after giving birth aren't good candidates for breeding. Foal heat can occur three to 22 days after foaling (10.2 days on average), and foal heats as late as 16 days are relatively common. The longer the time after foaling that the heat occurs, the

better the chances are of a successful pregnancy.

According to Heidi Smith, DVM (a veterinarian at Terrebonne, Oregon who specializes in equine reproduction) if foaling is clean and the placenta is shed promptly, the odds are quite good for successful breeding on foal heats occurring later than 12 days after birth. Mares coming into estrus too soon after giving birth are not ready to support a new pregnancy; the uterus may still have fluid in it and the uterine lining may not have returned to its former condition. Pregnancy rate in these mares may be 20 percent lower than in mares bred during subsequent heat cycles. Mares that ovulate at least 10 days or later after foaling, with little or no fluid left in the uterus, have a much better chance of becoming pregnant.

A clean foaling area is crucial for minimizing chances of serious infection picked up at foaling time. Clean grass, or a large, well-bedded stall in a clean barn are generally the best foaling areas. Clean straw is the bedding of choice for foaling. Sawdust is not good bedding for the foaling mare, since there is more chance for contamination of the reproductive tract and subsequent infection.

One of the first veterinarians to



argue that the main reasons for not breeding at foal heat can be corrected or compensated for by good management was Walter Zent, a broodmare practitioner from Lexington, Kentucky who discussed this subject in depth at the 35th annual AAEP convention in 1989. He stated that mares ovulating on day nine or later after foaling, and which show good estrus behavior, are the best candidates for breeding and have a much higher rate of pregnancy than those bred prior to nine days. He said that any mares showing evidence of uterine infection, hemorrhage, lacerations, bruising or retained placenta should not be bred on foal heat. If a foal must be repositioned during birth, vaginal manipulation should be kept to a minimum, if possible, to help prevent tissue damage and infection.

A mare's previous breeding records can be useful, to show whether she has a history of conceiving on foal heat. Chances of success are also better if the mare is in good physical condition—not too thin nor too fat. Mares bred at foal heat should also be bred to highly

fertile stallions, according to Zent.

Most veterinarians now agree that a mare is a good candidate for breeding on foal heat if her foal was delivered without difficulty and is strong and healthy, and the placenta was passed within three hours of foaling—especially if her cervix, at seven days after birth, is free from bruises and abnormal discharges and the uterus is recovering normally at the time of ovulation.

A mare's reproductive tract should be closely monitored after birth. The greatest amount of recovery in the reproductive tract occurs in the first five days after foaling, so it's best if ovulation occurs later than that. The longer the interval between foaling and foal heat, the more normal the uterus can be and the more it will be able to support pregnancy. Mares that are not good candidates for foal heat breeding should not be bred at that time, but their foal heat can be manipulated to give them a chance to recover more fully.

There are several management tools that can be used to help delay foal heat until the uterus is more normal, or to

bring the mare into her second heat more quickly. Either of these methods can help ensure more normal pregnancy rates during early breedings. Foal heat can be delayed a few days with injections of progesterone and estrogen immediately after foaling—to delay early ovulation and give a mare more time for the uterus to heal. Another option, if a mare has her foal heat too soon after foaling, is to give her prostaglandin six to 10 days after the foal heat ovulation, bringing her into an early second heat.

Breeding mares at foal heat can have several advantages. Some mares show foal heat and then do not cycle again while lactating. The mare's body, so recently pregnant, is still programmed hormonally for pregnancy, and it can often be easier to get them in foal at this time. A mare that has long gestations can be kept from "going off the calendar" and skipping a year, if bred soon after foaling. With careful monitoring and good management, many mares can be bred at foal heat with no problems.